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SUBJECT: SENIOR AYATOLLAH JITTERY ABOUT U.S. SECURITY RAMP
DOWN

Classified By: Classified by Political Minister Counselor Robert Ford f
or reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Ayatollah Hussein Al-Sadr, Baghdad's senior Shi'a cleric, warned PMIN on September 19 that the Iraqi government was extremely fragile and would be quickly toppled if the U.S. withdrew forces too quickly. Generally supportive of the U.S., he criticized the USG's current course and asked if we had invaded Iraq only to turn it over to Iran and the Wahhabis. He said Iraq's Shi'a community was deeply divided, with ISCI, the preeminent Shi'a party in Iraq's southern provinces, now hated with a passion formerly reserved for Saddam. He also warned that the Badr Corps, with Iranian support, was moving in to fill the void left by the declining Jaysh al-Mahdi, especially in Basra and Maysan, and claimed Sunni insurgents were training in the west of Syria. He also expressed concern for the safety of prominent secular parliament Mithal Alousi and was gratified to hear of U.S. efforts to defend him. A long-time friend of the Embassy, we found the Ayatollah more critical of the USG and worried about the future than in past encounters. End summary.

¶2. (C) Ayatollah Hussein Al-Sadr entertained PMIN and poloffs on September 19 for a Ramadan evening meal at his residence adjacent to the holy Khadimayn Shi'a shrine in northwestern Baghdad. Ayatollah Hussein is arguably the most influential Shi'a cleric in Baghdad, and presides over a national network of charitable and development activities, including the recent construction of a 600 bed orphanage. While he professes a preference for spiritual over political matters, he is in fact keenly interested and engaged in politics and has godfathered a tribal unity initiative and a nascent political party (the Iraqi People's Party). Though technically outranked by several other Najaf-based Ayatollahs, he remains one of Iraq's most influential Shi'a clerics and is considered a potential successor to Grand Ayatollah Sistani.

Security Good but Trending Downward

¶3. (C) Acknowledging major improvements to the security environment in the past two years, Ayatollah Hussein believed security was starting to trend downward. Much of the blame, he contended, belonged to the Iraqi security forces, which were ridden with sectarian militias and hobbled by an unprofessional and ill-educated officer corps. "I always warned against the absorption of (mainly Shi'a) militias into the security forces," he recalled, "bring them into the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Industry, anywhere, but not into the police and the army." Today it was not unusual to find an Iraqi major or colonel, with no military expertise, and barely able to read, he charged.

GOI Not Ready for Prime Time

¶4. (C) The Ayatollah asked about the SOFA negotiations and PMIN briefly outlined the state of play, highlighting that the U.S. needs a legal basis to keep troops in Iraq and that if troops remain they will stand down ever more as Iraqi forces take more and more of the burden. Sadr professed alarm at U.S. plans to ramp down security operations. "Did the U.S. invade Iraq only to turn it over, at the end, to Iran and the Wahabbis?" he asked indignantly. Sadr was adamant that the public lacks trust in the Iraqi security forces. Nor is the broader GOI able to shoulder national security responsibilities alone. Ba'athists and Iranian-backed elements pose a grave threat, and would likely topple the government within weeks if it lost direct U.S. security backing.

¶5. (C) The GOI is fragile and unpopular, Sadr claimed. Implying that he considered Maliki a weak leader, he recalled chiding the Prime Minister, earlier in his tenure, for trying to appease Sadrist by offering them cabinet spots ostensibly reserved for "independents." Sadr was particularly venomous about the circle of advisors around Maliki whom he considered unprincipled. The appointment of political party cronies instead of technocrats to the Cabinet has meant that service delivery remains atrocious, he continued. His own neighborhood of Kadhimiya receives as little as 2-3 hours of electricity per day. An adjacent neighborhood has received no electricity for the past four days, another iftar guest asserted.

BAGHDAD 00003040 002 OF 002

The Next Battle: Shi'a on Shi'a

¶6. (C) The GOI certainly cannot count on a united Shi'a constituency as a pillar of support, the Ayatollah observed. ISCI, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraqi, the Shi'a political party prevalent in Iraq's south, is now "cursed (by the people) as they used to curse Saddam," the Ayatollah claimed. Ammar al-Hakim, the heir apparent to his ailing father Abdelaziz, is now derisively referred to as 'Uday, after Saddam's brutish late son. Sadr noted that Maliki's Da'wa party meanwhile is stepping up its efforts to reach out to tribal figures in the South. While Sunni-Shi'a tensions continue to simmer, the Ayatollah noted, Shi'a-Shi'a conflict is the next item to explode.

¶6. (C) The Ayatollah further warned that Iran was increasing its penetration of the Iraqi political/security scene. He viewed the Badr Corps as little more than a Shi'a militia backed by Iran. Badr is, he asserted, muscling into areas of the South, particularly Basra and Maysan provinces, to fill the void left by the decline of Muqtada Al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. (Separately, another guest at the iftar insisted to poloff that Iranian intelligence maintained stations, usually disguised as "research centers," across the city of Baghdad, including one two doors down from his house.)

Don't Count Out Sadrists

¶7. (C) Reprising his disappointment with the USG's performance in Iraq, the Ayatollah lamented perceived U.S. inconsistencies in its pursuit of the rule of law. Sometimes the U.S. insists on precise enforcement of the law, sometimes it ignores it altogether, he charged. He believed the U.S. had badly mishandled the Muqtada al-Sadr file, poorly timing its issuance of an arrest warrant in 2003 and then failing to carry it out. The Sadrist movement, though in decline, was not extinct. The Office of the Martyr Sadr, the Jaysh al-Mahdi's political counterpart organization, remained influential in Sadr City, and in fact tacitly controlled the

various GOI development projects in the sprawling slum area.

Solidarity with Mithal Alousi

18. (C) Ayatollah as-Sadr also raised with us the case of Mithal Alousi, the secular and independent member of parliament recently castigated by his colleagues for making a trip to Israel. Concerned by parliament's lifting of his immunity from prosecution (for allegedly violating a Saddam-era law which prohibits travel to "enemy" countries), the Ayatollah urged the U.S. to intervene. PMIN assured the Ayatollah that the Embassy had already acted on Alousi's behalf, warning the Prime Minister's Office that this case, with dubious legal grounding, threatened to severely damage the GOI's standing in Washington, and specifically cautioning the government against dismissing his GOI-provided security detail. The Ayatollah expressed satisfaction with U.S. actions on Alousi's behalf.

Comment

19. (C) A longtime Embassy friend and interlocutor, we found Ayatollah Hussein more pointedly critical of the USG than he has been in the past. His criticism of the U.S. plans is of course mainly driven by his lack of confidence in the Maliki government, and its ability to survive absent comprehensive U.S. security backing. Particularly coming from a leading Shi'a cleric, his worry about U.S. plans to ramp down its security mission is striking - it reminded us of the alarmed tone of the Shaykh Abdelghafur Sammarai'e, the senior Sunni cleric in Iraq whom we visited last week. Both men have no formal role in politics but have networks that extend out into neighborhoods of Baghdad and beyond and have ready access to senior Iraqi officials. End comment.
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